

Sam's the raw new man

He was the bricklayer-turned-actor predicted to fail in his craft, writes Charles Miranda

SAM Worthington has a message for his old acting school. The National Institute of Dramatic Art might be considered Australia's premier drama college and it numbers among its graduates the likes of Mel Gibson, Cate Blanchett and Hugo Weaving but Worthington has a different opinion.

"There they don't teach you how to act," he says. "They just wrap you in cotton wool or wrap you in barbed wire."

Worthington leans forward and offers this information with the eagerness of a man who has waited a long time to get something off his chest.

"I got wrapped in barbed wire, told 'you will never work, your accent is shit, you sound like Bryan Brown'. Well f--- them - I'm now the golden boy, aren't I."

He sits back, folds his arms and grins.

With three of Hollywood's biggest summer blockbusters under his belt, it's the ultimate up-yours Worthington has waited 10 years since graduating to deliver.

He was expected to go nowhere but he's now on top of the Hollywood heap and that's not going to change anytime soon.

Worthington is intense, brash and often swears to highlight the points he wants to make. He loves his football and his mates. He admits he is stubborn, sometimes ill-tempered and with a no-nonsense directness much like his hero Russell Crowe.

But it is those traits, good looks and a raw talent that has endeared him to Hollywood.

He stole the limelight from Christian Bale with his performance in last year's instalment in the Terminator films, *Terminator Salvation*, then was picked by Oscar-award winning director James Cameron for the eagerly awaited 3D science fiction flick *Avatar* to be released in December.

Early next year he has the leading role in the big budget remake of *Clash of the Titans*.

In between these he starred opposite Keira Knightley in *Last Night* and post-World War II thriller *The Debt* with Helen Mirren.

A busy schedule for any actor particularly one that a year ago was relatively unknown.

"How do I feel? Very f--- lucky," he says during a break from filming in London.

"I think any actor fears unemployment so anytime you can get to work on movies of this scale is pleasurable and hopefully you are jumping into and getting lost in another world. Not playing the same character and playing different hearts. I think there is a softness in these characters and I don't think an action movie should be called an action movie. Hopefully I think what you



INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY: Zoe Saldana as the character Neytiri's avatar (above left) and Sam Worthington's character Jake Sully as his avatar in the sci-fi film *Avatar*. Worthington (below left) is now one of Hollywood's most bankable stars.

can always bring to a movie on this level is the gravity and weight you can put into a small movie - you put that into something where the sets are bigger, the stakes are higher the CG effects are more. That's all that I think these movies are. I wouldn't actually call them action movies. I would call them a dramatic journey."

Dramatic journey or not, the ambitious CG-laden *Avatar* and *Clash of the Titans* have lifted the Perth-born Worthington into a new league. The high school dropout from Rockingham, Western Australia, was working as a bricklayer in Sydney when at 19 he auditioned for NIDA. It wasn't a happy union, despite him winning a scholarship, but he graduated and after a stint on stage cut his teeth on a host of Aussie movies including *Bootmen*, *Getting Square* and *Dirty Deeds*. But it was *Somersault* in 2004 that caught Hollywood's attention. Then the movie scripts began arriving. When auditioning for *Terminator*, he began simply "I'm a bricklayer from Western Australia" and turned up with nothing but a bag of clothes. He calls it his gypsy's life - moving from hotel to hotel, country to country.

"I heard someone the other day say I was the hot new thing," he says. "I'm 33 mate - I'm the hot worn thing. Then they say I'm the sexiest thing on the planet and I say you should see me in the morning - I can lose that pretty quickly."

"My life gets better and better as far as I am concerned. I didn't set out in this industry to be famous. I set out to do a job. Someone told me years ago if you want to get noticed, you get in the VIP section you walk in with your entourage and you stand there with your dark sunglasses on in the middle of a dark night. Someone came up to me in the pub yesterday and said 'I've seen your movie and I like your work, thanks very much mate'. If they came up and said your movie sucked I'd say 'oh well'. Anyone who says

they don't want their work to be recognised is a liar first and foremost but when it comes to being famous and all the bullshit ... as long as they're appreciative of my work then I'm on the right track."

Bryan Brown told Worthington never to forget it took balls to go up and ask someone for an autograph. Worthington now passes on that advice as his own.

"If anyone comes up to me and says 'hey man how ya goin', can I have your autograph?' - that takes a lot of nuts. You take it in your stride. Matt Damon can go to a baseball game and no one really hassles him but if you want to drive around with a motorcade of people, you're asking for trouble. I still shop and do washing as well. I have an extraordinary job so I try to lead a normal, ordinary life."

Worthington credits his ability to act to watching Crowe on the big screen.

"If I can do just a hundred-millionth of what that man can do then I will die happy," he says. Indeed, it was Crowe who emailed the film director known only as McG during auditions for *Terminator* and declared: "You should take a close look at this guy. He's a no-tears, honest actor."

Worthington prepares for every audition and every role intensely. He doesn't just read the script. He studies the history of the time and place it's set in. He also makes no distinction between the big blockbuster and the low-budget flick and does not want to get tied to the hype, for example with the 3D sci-fi *Avatar*, which is being described as the future of films with its more than \$A250 million budget shot stereoscopically with cutting-edge technology.

"I think whatever the budget, whether it is a \$200 million movie or a \$2 million movie, actors shouldn't feel any pressure," he says.

Worthington says he's acting because he loves it and wants to get better.

"I'm not waiting for a review or a personal public opinion to make me raise my game," he says. "I'm raising it myself."

Avatar opens on December 17.



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